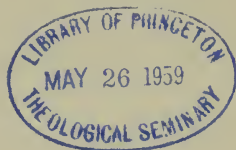


J.B. Shearer

The Canon of Scripture

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IS IT DIVINELY AUTHENTICATED?

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THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE.

THERE are many interesting questions concerning the Scriptures which are not yet answered; and there are some others, not yet formally asked, for want of a definite sense of their importance. If all could be answered in a satisfactory way it would greatly simplify Christian apologetics, and supersede much hostile criticism. It has been long a matter of comment that most of the attacks on the Scriptures originate either in ignorance of the matters objected to, or of the evidence therefor, or in a misapprehension of some important principle or fact on which the authority of the Scriptures hinges. No question has occupied more attention than that of the authority of the Canon.

By Canon we mean the authoritative list of books in our Bible. Such questions as these have given much trouble: Why does the Canon include certain books and exclude others? How do we know that all the books have been included or excluded that ought to have been? Did the list of books need an inspired authentication as well as the books themselves?

Various answers have been given to the trend of these questions. The Papist claims the obvious necessity for a divine authentication of the Canon. He finds it in the claimed infallibility of "Mother Church," in the exercise of which she includes in her list certain books which Protestants reject as spurious. She charges Protestants with rejecting these on purely rationalistic grounds, on a mere criticism of their contents. She says that if we reject the infallibility of her councils there is left us no authoritative Canon. The Higher Criticism, in minimizing the miraculous, and in reducing inspiration to a higher action of merely human faculties, finds the criterion of all truth in Christian consciousness discerning truth as its own sole witness. This most refined form of rationalism finds some truth everywhere, both inside and outside of the Scriptures, and makes the question of canonical authority

of little moment. It dismisses Papist and Protestant alike as worshippers of a kind of fetish called the Canon.

It is not now the purpose to give these critics more than a passing notice, and such incidental refutation as may follow from an attempt to set up the truth. Nor is it our purpose to make formal reply to the Papist, for he seems to us to be right in his fundamental proposition that the Canon needs divine authentication. His mistake is in lodging it in the infallibility of his church.

We are concerned with the Protestants' view. They believe in canonical authority for each and every book in the sacred volume as received. They hold this view in the full exercise of the right of private judgment as against the claims of popes and councils. But how do we reach it?

We get it first by tradition and by authority, just as we do the most of our knowledge before we begin to verify for ourselves. Tradition gives presumptive and prescriptive authority, even though we do not accept it as final, as does the prelatist. When we wish further confirmation we usually discuss the claims of the several books themselves, the external and the internal evidence of their genuineness and authenticity, both separately and as parts of a whole. And as believers, we rely on the self-evidencing power of the Spirit operating in our hearts through the truth and giving us what is aptly termed spiritual discernment. This last is the beginning and the end with most minds, and ought so to be, for it is an experimental knowledge of God and truth. A believer might, however, attain this from having seen and read one single gospel or epistle, or even from having heard one single sermon with no knowledge of the Canon as such. Many books of the Bible set up no special claim to canonical authority, such as Esther and Ruth. Is the Canon to be settled only by an examination of the inspiration of each several book? And if we could by examination determine the inspiration of any book, have we a right to assume that every inspired book belongs in the Canon and was enrolled therein? Our writers have realized the difficulty of a final argument from this source. They have, therefore, sought to set up the Old Testament Canon on the authority of the New. Nor is there any question that Christ and his apostles do give the

most abundant and satisfying testimony to the exact Canon as it stands to-day. Uninspired authors do the same, but not in a way so satisfying to the believer in both Testaments.

Having accepted the Old Testament Canon on the authority of the New, it becomes necessary to vindicate the New, else both are put into the same jeopardy, unless we accept as final and satisfactory the usual argument from tradition confirmed as already outlined. The same instinct that seeks divine authentication in one case craves it also in the other. Does the authority of the whole Canon depend on a sound induction of particulars, and has such induction been exhaustive both by comprehension and by exclusion?

The more we look at this matter, the more we feel the need of an attested Canon, carrying with it the same authority as a list of books that we claim for their contents if they belong to it.

It does not seem final and sufficient to rest the Old Testament Canon on the references of Christ and his apostles, for they do not so rest it. They found that Canon in existence as an authorized Canon, settled as against the Samaritans, who accepted only the first five books, and as against the earlier Sadducees, who rejected the later prophets. The question therefore recurs: On what authority did the Jews the world over accept it as complete and authoritative? Such authority, if they had it, would amply justify Christ and his apostles in bringing all their claims and teachings to the test of its contents. An appeal to it was a final appeal to divine authority itself divinely attested.

The Old Testament Canon was settled during the intermediate period between Malachi and Christ. If it be true, as is commonly stated, that the Jews were without prophet or oracle during that period, then the Canon could not have had more than the human authority of those who settled it. If, however, it can be shown that there was prophet and oracle during that period, then it may be possible to connect the settling of the Canon with them in such a way as to find a divine authentication. To this new question let us therefore address ourselves:

1. The civil government of the Hebrew commonwealth was a theocracy, in which the Lord Jehovah was the civil head or king.

The human head, whether judge, king, or governor, was his viceroy who ruled in his name and by his authority. The organ of communication between the king and his viceroy was prophet and oracle. The prophet was a civil functionary as well as a religious teacher. The oracle was limited to the high priest, and belonged to him by virtue of his office, as will be shown presently. If we are right in claiming, as all the authorities do, that the theocracy continued from its institution at Mount Sinai to the coming of Christ, with a claimed interregnum during the period of the kingdom (which is hardly probable), then the prophet or oracle, or both, were a necessity. A means of inter-communication is an essential feature of a theocracy. Pagan theocracies had their oracles. The Papacy, which claims to be a theocracy, has been consistent in claiming infallibility. We thus have an *a priori* argument for the existence of prophet and oracle down to the time of Christ, which at least raises a presumption in its favor sufficient to throw the burden of proof on him who denies it.

2. When Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, saw the vision while ministering in the temple, and afterwards came out and "could not speak unto them," the people "perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple; for he beckoned unto them and remained speechless." Luke tells the story so simply that we are constrained to conclude that the people were no strangers to such marvels. We need hardly quote the matter of fact way in which Mary received her vision, nor the recorded inspiration and prophecies of Mary, of Elizabeth, and of Zacharias, given before Christ was born, because plausible exception might be taken to the fairness of their citation in this connection.

3. There are two cases much more to the point, Anna and Simeon. Anna, the prophetess, a "widow of fourscore years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day," was only exercising her prophetic function when she saw the Babe, and "spoke of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem."

Simeon was "just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Ghost was upon him, and it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost that he should not see death before

he had seen the Lord's Christ." There is no need to quote his beautiful prophecies.

Now both these, Anna and Simeon, date many years back into the intermediate period of which it is claimed, "they had neither prophet nor oracle," and cannot in any sense be called a part of a new dispensation.

4. Josephus makes mention of two prophets who lived half a century before the birth of Christ, Simeon or Pollio, and Sameas, his colleague. The former is supposed to be the father of the Simeon mentioned in Luke. Pollio and Sameas were president and vice-president of the great Sanhedrim, and also of the great university at Jerusalem, and were the most learned and influential of all the Jewish doctors. Josephus not only tells us that they were prophets, but he also gives some of their prophecies and their fulfilment, admixed with no puerilities. Why need we reject or even suspect his story when we find the cases of Anna and Simeon, belonging to substantially the same period, attested by the inspired historian? The critic complains that there is no profane testimony to the Scripture prophet, and when we cite this testimony of Josephus, he flippantly rejects the whole because, forsooth, Josephus played the sycophant to the victorious Romans in his history of the Jewish wars. Away with such destructive criticism.

5. The crowning fact, however, is found in the eleventh chapter of John. In that last council of chief priests and Pharisees, in which it was decided to compass the death of Jesus, the leading argument was made by Caiaphas in these words: "Ye fools, ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us that one man die for the people, and not that the whole nation perish." The Evangelist in commenting on this says, "This he spake not of himself; but, being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation." In other words, he prophesied by virtue of his office as high priest. John evidently knew that the oracle belonged to the high priest by virtue of his office, even though the office had been made venal by the Romans, and degraded to an annual appointment. Note also the remainder of the prophecy, "And not for that nation only, but that also he

should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad." The first part of the prophecy he used in its literal terms in furtherance of their malicious purposes; the last and more glorious part he could neither comprehend nor use. We have here a case like Balaam's, officially true, personally corrupt. The office of Caiaphas, and his prophecy as high priest belong without question to the theocracy and not to a new dispensation.

6. There is one parallel fact which bears distinctly on these interpretations by way of corroboration. God did not leave his people without miracles of power as well as of knowledge for a testimony during the intermediate period. John tells us of this also in the fifth chapter of his Gospel: "Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water." The new version puts the next verse, about the daily visit of the angel to the pool, on the margin, questioning its authority; but the material facts remain the same if this verse be rejected altogether on what many regard as insufficient grounds. The story is familiar. This sanitarium, so aptly named Bethesda, "House of Mercy," was an old institution at Jerusalem. The five porches and the multitude of sick folk, and the Sabbath visits of numerous friends on errands of mercy, were all a Jewish product, and the cures were miracles of power, or were nothing. John evidently believed in the whole, but mentions it only incidentally, not so much to give an account of the pool and its cures, as to tell of the malignity excited against the Master for healing on the Sabbath day the impotent man who had so long been unable to avail himself of the God-given cure. Such incidental mention rather strengthens the testimony of the historian. Much hostile criticism of this passage gets an honest backing in the supposed necessity of eliminating the miraculous from this period of the history. The facts cited all reinforce each other, and disarm such hostile criticism arising from such pre-judgment. Indeed, there is no presumption against either miracle or oracle at any stage of the Mosaic dispensation. Besides, the distinction of Jewish and

Christian is of little moment in this connection, for Christianity is only the culmination of Judaism and its full fruitage; and all the prophecy and miracle connected with the birth of Christ, and of his forerunner, John, and with the ministry of both, are in their last analysis as distinctly a part of Judaism as the signs and wonders of Sinai. Nay more, the last tragedy, in which they slew their King on Calvary, closes the theocratic covenant set up at Sinai; and the darkness, the quaking earth, the rending rocks, the opening graves, and the veil of the temple rent in twain, are but the fitting counterparts of Sinai's scenes.

Let us return to the question of the Canon. There is no denying that it was settled in the intermediate period. It was a burning question in its day, on which largely turned the long and bitter feuds of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Samaritans. It is fair to assume that so important a question enlisted the best talent, the largest learning, and the highest authority to be found among the Jewish people. We are, therefore, prepared to accept the substantial truth of the Jewish traditions, which tell us that the Canon was the special care of what they call the Great Synagogue, for want of a better name, consisting of one hundred and twenty men, beginning with Daniel, the prophet, and closing with Simon, the just, running over a space of two hundred years, and including the post-exilic prophets as well as their most learned doctors and their high priests. They ascribe much work to Ezra and his associates, and much also to the last on the list, Simon, the just, whose reputation for sanctity, piety, and learning seems to overtop all the rest, himself the most famous high priest of his people, to whom also belonged the oracle by virtue of his office, as it did to all his predecessors. It is significant also that numerous traditions and fables of the supernatural cluster around his memory.

We are warranted in accepting the work of such men, itself of such gravity and perfected in such conditions, as final and authoritative. The Jews accepted their work as having the divine *imprimatur* upon it. Not only are the presumptions all in its favor, but the evidence is all concurrent. Such claims are paramount and could be set aside only, if at all, by the most overwhelming counter testimony, and that indisputably divine. None were left

to question the authority of the completed Canon except the outside Samaritan, whose voice was no longer heard and to whom Daniel, Ezra, and Simon were a rejected tribunal.

Starting on this impregnable foundation of divine authority, Christ and his apostles enforced their claims by continuous reference to "Moses and the prophets," with the superadded infallible witness of the Holy Ghost in signs and wonders following. The authority of that Canon was so well attested that Father Abraham can say to the rich man in torment, "If they believe not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

The heresies of Christ's day did not attack the canonical authority of a single book on the list. That had been settled beyond all cavil; they rather perverted and nullified certain Scripture teachings. Here, in part, originated the necessity for those additions to the canon which we call the New Testament. Just here also we may discover the necessity for the wondrous miracles of that generation.

The miracle, in its last analysis, is the prophet's testimonials, God on the witness-stand along side of his servants guaranteeing their claims and avouching their teachings. The numerous miracles of Christ served this purpose: "Believe me for the works' sake"; every word was established by triple testimony of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Then came the apostles doing "greater works than these," greater certainly in their number and variety, and in the prodigious number of miracle workers, every one of whom was a proper prophet and a divinely commissioned teacher. We hardly realize their number. Beginning with Pentecost, the most extraordinary charisms of the Holy Ghost were distributed direct from heaven on great numbers, as also on Cornelius' household. The same gifts came lavishly on all on whom the apostles laid their hands. These teachers were so numerous at Corinth that it led to ambitious, but well-meant, disorders.

It was proper, easy, and natural that the writings of inspired teachers should be received as of equal authority with their oral teachings, and be even more highly prized because of their permanent value. The church in the first century of its existence

was practically a miracle-working and inspired church. One of the apostles lived till the close of the first century in the full exercise of his faculties and his office, and it is fair to presume that some on whom he had conferred the charisms of the Spirit lived until the middle of the second century, and that multitudes of competent witnesses who had seen them lived to a much later date. The gradual disappearance of these miraculous gifts must be recognized if we would account for variant and semi-contradictory statements of later uninspired writers when referring to the continuance of miracles in the early church.

The question now recurs: How was the New Testament Canon settled? On what principle were the names of the several books enrolled on an authoritative list? It is confessed that the list was perfected and promulgated and transmitted by uninspired men sitting in council. Did they sit in judgment on the inspiration of each book, and pass upon it as an original question? If so, their adjudication was only a matter of opinion and not final, and would be of no more force than if they had promulgated the meaning of any passage of Scripture. The best human opinions are subject to revision, and often need it.

Competent human testimony, however, is final as to questions of fact, Hume to the contrary notwithstanding. It is here that the human and the divine meet in our faith. We need a divine attestation for revelation, and we rely on human testimony to perpetuate the facts of the attestation, and here our faith rests secure.

Now the acceptance of any book of the New Testament by the church of the first century and the early part of the second as authoritative is sufficient evidence of its canonicity, because the early church was for all practical purposes an inspired church, and the consensus of that church was final on vital matters. This would be the more obvious if some master hand would discriminate among the promises of the Holy Ghost and his infallible guidance, and show just how many of them were limited specifically to the apostolic church, and how many of them were of general application to the end of time. Such a discrimination would be of great value to settle many other matters that still need elucidation, such as the Papal infallibility, witness of the Spirit,

higher life, faith cure, the limitations of church authority, the right of private judgment, and many others.

The real question to which the fathers addressed themselves was this: What books did the church contemporary with the writers receive as genuine and canonical? This question they were abundantly competent to handle, for the evidence was all accessible; more so, however, for some books than for others, as the history shows. Some of the books were written earlier and had a wider publication than others. The acceptance of these, of course, was the promptest. Others were not accepted universally till the facts were known. It is true also that some of the books were strenuously objected to. This goes to show that they were wide awake and determined to sift all the evidence so as not to be imposed upon by candidates for canonization. And what is more to the point, the objections raised against the canonicity of certain books were based on their internal character and innate difficulties, as was notably the case with the Book of Revelation, rather than on any lack of evidence as to authorship, or as to acceptance by the contemporary church. In other words, the objectors sought to parry positive evidence by arguments purely rationalistic, a form of polemics not yet obsolete.

There is no place here for the infallible attestation of "Mother Church" expressed by councils or otherwise, nor is there any need of it. We have a Canon, both the Old and the New, attested by those who were as competent to do so as the authors themselves to write with divine authority. We depend on competent uninspired testimony to bear witness to the fact of such attestation, and to transmit the list of the books as a substantial fact, just as also we depend on testimony for the contents of the books themselves.

The case before us may not be made out as lucidly as could be desired, nor as conclusively as may be possible from a more careful study of all the facts bearing on the question; still, there is no other hypothesis that satisfies the necessities of the problem so well. The Sacred Book furnishes us an infallible standard of faith and practice. Its authority must rest on other attestation than itself, and as infallible as itself; otherwise, the argument be-

comes the fallacy of reasoning in a circle, all which has often been shown in discussing the necessity for the miraculous in attestation of a revelation from God. God has never left divine truth as its own sufficient witness.

We do not depreciate the value of special evidence, both internal and external, to the genuineness and authenticity of particular books of the Canon, but the argument is, in the main, only ancillary and confirmatory, and is adapted to silence the caviller, or to strengthen the faith of the doubter. Such arguments confirm a claimed authority, but do not lay the foundations of it.

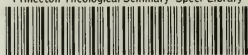
If Christian apologetics shall once occupy this ground of a conceded Canon divinely authenticated, she can then cry with Paul, "To the law and to the testimony," or with Christ, "It is written"; her weapons shall be offensive instead of defensive; her arrows shall be sharp in the hearts of the King's enemies. Modern criticism, a wild and careering steed, unmanaged and unmanageable, shall then be broken to harness, docile as any cart-horse. When genius, and faith, and critical acumen shall work together to decipher the oracle and to ascertain *what* is written, and *what* "saith the Holy Ghost," then shall criticism herself use her weapons, destructive and remorseless, but "mighty through God," for the "casting down of strongholds," and for "casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."

NOTE.—The Jewish Synod of Jamnia, about A. D. 70, issued an authoritative list of the Old Testament books. This list is claimed to be the same as that recognized in Christ's day and subsequently confirmed by Josephus. The action of this Synod may be fairly interpreted as declarative against certain new sects, the Erseenes and Zealots, as well as against Sadducees and Samaritans, some of whom made an additional plea for certain apochryphal books, while some perhaps objected to including any but the five books of Moses. This Council did not make the list, but vindicated and declared it.

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